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Review

Simple justice

Richard Kluger
Simple Justice

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 823 Pages

In *Simple Justice*, Richard Kluger combines moral passion and intellectual integrity as he majestically describes the complex social, political and legal events which culminated in the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Although the unfolding of this desegregation case is the focal point of the book, this ironically titled epic portrays black America's struggle for equality from the days of slavery through the Nixon era.

Each chapter of this powerful book reflects Kluger's talent for tireless research, his conscientious attention to detail and his deep compassion for the oppressed. The reader is introduced to over 900 individuals who occupied various roles in the drama leading up to the demise of the "separate, but equal" doctrine in American race relations. Although Thurgood Marshall is undoubtedly Kluger's hero in the *Brown* triumph, the book contains detailed biographies of many other civil rights leaders. The author highlights the lives of a neglected circle of black intellectuals who not only were proud, ambitious and accomplished, but also had blind faith in the American dream and an unshakable belief in the ultimate victory of justice over oppression.

Even though *Simple Justice* is historical in nature and the research is well documented, it reads more like a novel than an historical account. The reader is not left with cold facts often found in text books, but rather is given vivid personal histories of the characters and the communities involved in this moving drama. Kluger consulted a wide range of sources in his seven years of relentless research to enable him to portray the informal side of his subjects and create plausible accounts of private conversations. The author exhibits keen perception in his enlightening descriptions of the behind-the-scenes maneuverings of the NAACP and the inner workings of the Supreme Court.

This remarkable piece of scholarship, however, is not without flaws. Kluger displays such a commitment to the cause of racial justice that he gets somewhat carried away with detail. His tendency toward wordy descriptions of events and lengthy biographical sketches of minor characters is somewhat distracting. Also, additional editing could have been advantageously used in several places throughout the book. Greater attention to organization of the tremendous volume of material would have helped the reader keep track of the various strands of the plot and

numerous subplots as they mesh to form the five cases that collectively evoked the historical *Brown* proclamation. This highly ambitious book is also marred by the epilogue which summarizes the 20 years since the *Brown* case. The treatment of this post-*Brown* period is sketchy, hurried, and anticlimactic; it suffers from comparison with the quality of the other 26 chapters of the book.

But the weaknesses of *Simple Justice* are minor when compared to its strengths. Kluger's gripping account of one of the major turning points in American history is particularly significant since so much current national attention is focused on the issue of busing for desegregation. Kluger definitely has a message to leave with his readers: Although justice is not simple and the law is not always just, the American system of jurisprudence does provide avenues to effect reform for those who are willing to exhibit courage and perseverance. A spirit of optimism pervades the entire book, though this optimism occasionally seems to border on naivete. The civil rights leaders, who fought relentlessly to outlaw school segregation and to strike down state statutes which were making a mockery of the Federal Constitution, seemed to believe that once discriminatory laws were eliminated, equality and justice would prevail. History has painfully disproven this simplistic view and shown that men do not live by law alone. An undying faith in the ability to find total redress through the legal system is somewhat unrealistic. Once legal barriers are removed, there is no guarantee that equitable practices will automatically follow.

Simple Justice is definitely worth reading. Those interested in any aspect of law, education or the quest for equality certainly should read this book. And there are few who would not benefit or be moved by this thought-provoking rendition of a painful portion of our American heritage. In addition to its historical value, this book nurtures shame and indignation toward injustices which still prevail in a society that espouses equal opportunities for all citizens. The final act in the unfolding scenario to achieve 'simple justice' is yet to come, but Kluger leaves the reader with hope that despite setbacks since 1954 the civil rights movement will continue to move forward.

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